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**Sci-Tech News**

Volume 56 | Issue 1

Article 4

January 2002

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## Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Sharon Quinn (2002) "Emergency Web Page Creation: A Response to September 11," *Sci-Tech News*: Vol. 56: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <http://jdc.jefferson.edu/scitechnews/vol56/iss1/4>

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# Emergency Web Page Creation: A Response to September 11

by Sharon Quinn Fitzgerald

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Like so many others on the morning of Tuesday, September 11, I stood in shock, watching in our library's Media Resource Center as the events unfolded. A mix of students and library staff watched mutely as the second plane sliced through Tower 2 at the World Trade Center. The reality was so difficult to absorb that I found myself detaching from my body and watching the room from a distance—a classic denial effort. Surely this must be a Hollywood trick to promote the latest disaster movie?

But the reality was still there on September 12. As we slowly started to emerge from shock, people began to ask, Why? And what could we do here in Maine? What did this mean to our culturally diverse academic community?

## The Library: An Integral Role in Campus Web Operations

Our library has played an integral role in providing resources via the World Wide Web since late 1993. For a number of years, Fogler Library was responsible for managing the campus Web site. We continue to have a strong partnership with the Web office, so I promptly contacted our Web manager to see if there were plans to put up a Web page focused on the terrorist attacks. He thought it was an excellent idea but did not have the staff to devote time to such an effort. I offered to make the time, and when the first edition was ready, a link was immediately posted at the top of the campus home page.

## Team Approach to the Web

We have used a team approach to developing our Web page since early 1994. As many early adopters discovered, the skills and knowledge needed to effectively utilize the Internet crossed traditional reporting lines and organizational structures. In the "early days," both technical and public service staff, working side by side rather than in parallel worlds, moved our site forward very quickly. Currently, virtually all staff members are involved in authoring Web pages, but the teamwork model prevails, which served us well as we put the terrorism page together.

As the library Web manager, I subscribe to a number of listservs on Web-related topics. Through one of these, I became aware of a Web site at Morrisville College in New York, focusing on the New York City and Pentagon attacks, that Wilfred Drew was putting together. In another example of the spirit of collaboration, Drew encouraged oth-

ers to draw from his efforts to build their own sites. A timely resource list on Mary Jane Block's "Neat New Stuff on the Net" site, brought to my attention by one of our reference librarians, served as another initial key source. With these two resources as our foundation, we began to fashion a structure for our own site.<sup>1</sup>

## Concerns of Our Academic Community

While we felt it was important to include broad-based resources, we also wanted to address the specific needs of our campus, drawing on the expertise of our academic community. I consulted our international program director for a profile of our international students and discovered that we had a significant number of Muslim and Arabic countries represented in our student body. The sense of isolation international students often feel was certainly heightened by the 9/11 events. We wanted to be sure to provide access to sources that would serve them, so we included international news links and pointers to consulates in the United States, which in turn offered the opportunity to broaden our own perceptions and context for what rapidly became a global event.

Throughout our university community there was great concern about how to present and digest these events with our children. The University of Maine has a significant number of nontraditional students, many of whom are parents. They, along with faculty and staff, were at a loss as to how to explain the tragedy to their children. For them, we included links to local professionals and nationwide resources, which proved to be popular.

The following two comments, sent to the Webmaster, indicate the usefulness of a timely, high-quality site:

"How to explain the unexplainable? Thanks for including links that help at home as well as on campus." (in reference to the "How to Cope" section) "Recognizing and addressing the potential for further isolation on the part of our international students—much appreciated!" (in reference to our inclusion of a broad range of news and consulate links)

## Structure

The site's initial structure was very straightforward, including selected links in four areas: news, government sources, how to cope with our own reactions and those of

family members, and how to help the victims and their families. These four categories clearly defined the site as one addressing an emergency situation. We linked to both local and national resources, including a local news article that offered professional advice on how to talk with children about the attacks and tips from the American Red Cross on coping with disaster.

We encouraged users to contact us with suggested links. Most contributed to our "How to Help" section, reflecting the worldwide desire to respond with positive action.

### Usage and Transition

The site's heaviest use was in the three weeks immediately following the attacks. After that, usage tapered off sharply and the page ultimately found a new point of departure from the library's list of Internet subject guides in the area of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

The transition from an emergency site to an educational resource tool began within just a couple of weeks of the site's launch. From an academic standpoint, identifiable resources that would answer the question of "why" were in high demand and short supply. Here in the United States, there is a noticeable dearth of scholars and other experts on Afghanistan and its people. Educational resources have started to emerge, aided to some extent by publishers such as LexisNexis that stepped forward and made relevant sources available without subscription for a period of time.

As we continue to maintain and develop the site, we have had a unique opportunity to watch in an accelerated time frame the shape of things to come. For better or worse, the number of government-related sites has grown as new bodies of government have emerged, such as the Office of

Homeland Security, and others are redefining their focus (see, for example, the U.S. Department of Health site for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Meta resources are also emerging. One example is the terrorism "library" sponsored by a faculty member at Boston College (<http://www.terrorismlibrary.com/>). The goal is to "provide users with access to an organized collection of materials that will facilitate their own research and opinion formation." Only three months later, it is interesting to reflect on our initial online responses via the Wayback Machine archival project (<http://september11.archive.org>).

### Conclusion

Building the terrorism site for the University of Maine was more than a constructive means for channeling anger and grief in the aftermath of the September 11 events. It was also an opportunity to reaffirm the values implicit to librarianship in providing patrons with timely, authoritative, and readily available resources.

### <sup>1</sup>Listservs and Web Resources

Web4Lib Electronic Discussion Group—an electronic discussion for library-based World Wide Web managers: [web4lib@sunsite.berkeley.edu](mailto:web4lib@sunsite.berkeley.edu)

Serials in Libraries Discussion Forum:  
[SERIALST@list.uvm.edu](mailto:SERIALST@list.uvm.edu) Electronic Resources in Libraries: [ERIL-L@listserv.binghamton.edu](mailto:ERIL-L@listserv.binghamton.edu)

Scout Report: <http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/report/sr/current>

Neat New Stuff on the Net: <http://marylaine.com/neatnew.html>

*ResearchBUZZ* newsletter: <http://www.researchbuzz.com>  
LII Mailing List: <http://lii.org/search/file/maillinglist>